

untamed creature by lucdarling

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Summary:

Max's mom gets married, just after they receive a strange invitation for a school Max has never heard of.

Max goes to magic school and meets her stepbrother.

Max's summer with her mundane stepfather begins.

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Author's Note:

I was inspired to write one particular scene in this, and the rest of the words grew around it. I think of this work as a triptych, three scenes that go together. It's not Hogwarts but uh, you can see the influence. I guess we never really leave HP fandom!

If you enjoy this, please let me know in the comment box.

"So your son," her mom starts the conversation as Max stands next to her, slowly freezing in the cool of a lingering winter. The wedding was a quick affair and her dress is itchy with its lace around her wrists and knees. "He wasn't able to make it?"

Neil smiles but Max thinks it looks forced. "No, he attends some fancy school on the East coast. They offered a scholarship and he just about begged. Once he's there, I don't hear so much as a peep until he writes that the term's ending. Last year, he didn't even bother to come home for Christmas!"

"How unfortunate," Max's mom says and smooths Max's hair down with the hand not holding Neil's. Max wishes she would stop touching her. All it's doing is making Max more irritable but she was promised dessert if she behaved and kept any outbursts to herself until she and mom went back home. "Maxine here was just offered a scholarship to a place on the east coast herself, though I'm not sure we should accept."

Max turns to look at her when she says those words and pleads. "No Mom! You promised I could go! I can learn and be better!" She really didn't mean to make her stuffed toys come to life. She still isn't sure how she did it, since no amount of wishing or thrusting her hand in the direction of the shelf they sit on has produced the same result. Mostly, they just dance and fall off onto the floor like a bad conga line if they do anything at all.

She doesn't dare remind her mom that if Max can't go to magic school, her magic will be bound. Max's magic is a deep well inside her, behind her belly button but also living in her chest and running down her legs. It's feral and pulsing, the same sort of joy Max gets from skateboarding down a hill. Taking that away from her would be like cutting a limb off, Max just knows it.

"We'll see. I'm not sure Salem is ready for a wild thing like you," Max's mom gives her Polite Company laugh.

Neil's dark eyes sharpen, this time on Max. "Salem, you say? My boy goes there. He got a queer sort of letter around Max's age, as a matter of fact."

Max's mom lets out a relieved breath. "Yes, exactly! Oh, it was such a surprise. Maxine's father left us without a word one day and then all of this to take in, I suppose it was his fault."

"Stranger things keep happening that you have no explanation for. Then a frumpy woman in a housedress walks up to your door and says magic is real." Neil scoffs in derision. "Don't you worry, Sue, they go off to that school and we can live our lives until summer comes just like normal."

Max listens to Neil talk and seethes under her freckled skin. Her magic is a burning ember now, pulsing with each word that leaves his mouth and wrapping Max up protectively in its warmth so they don't hurt so much. Because Max isn't Normal any longer, if she ever truly was.

"So you're my step-sister," A blond boy some years older than Max leans against the tree she's studying under. "How is the old man? Still terrible, I bet."

Max snickers. "He's awful. William, right?" She looked at a photo before she left for school, Neil telling her that her new brother was leaving from a friend's house otherwise they would be boarding the train together.

"It's Billy," her new family member says and drops down beside Max

without a care for grass stains. "What do you want to be called? Maxine is for an old lady with her hair in curlers."

They laugh together at the image and Billy even helps her understand the theory behind the warming charm, that the heat has to come from somewhere.

She watches him during meals, when spies Billy in the crowd. He's boisterous and happy, curls floating around his face when he forgets to tie them back. Max is happy here too, making friends with her classmates and learning magic and loads of new games where the pieces talk back to you.

Billy passes her in the hallway one day between classes, ruffles her hair with a large hand much to Max's displeasure.

"Who was that?" Jane asks, newer to their world than even Max is.

Mike looks like he bit into something sour and answers before Max can open her mouth. "Billy, one of the so-called kings of campus. Life of the party, to hear my sister tell it."

"Your sister, who can't hold her liquor according to those same rumors." Lucas counters with a smile to take the sting out of the words. "But seriously Max, what was up with that? Billy usually sticks with his own cadre and you're great but nowhere near enough to the power level he looks for."

"We're family, I guess." Max says, rocking back on her heels. She delights in their shocked faces.

Dustin puts a hand to his chin in the way he thinks makes him look wise like a garden statue but really makes him look constipated. Someday, Max will tell him and try not to laugh too hard. "Be careful. I've heard he comes back every year with a new wand."

"Okay," Max says with a shrug. She's still rather new to all the magic and using it for everyday things. Sometimes, the Party forgets she didn't grow up in it like they did.

"Cadre now, coterie later." Will says with big eyes. "He doesn't feel dark, not at his core but there's something about Billy after he comes

back to school." He rubs at his chest like it hurts. "He usually settles after the first week or so but everyone knows to avoid his attention until then."

Max hums, thoughtful. She wonders what Billy is like outside of school. She can't imagine Billy - who spends his time learning everything without a care for if it's Light, Grey, or Dark it's said and the rest of it outside class in quiet corners with whispers and promises where a teacher is always a moment too late to stop anything - Max can't picture imagine that Billy listening to Neil's barbed words quietly even if you're not supposed to use magic outside of school.

Max doesn't know why the train is the tradition at the end of the school year, something to do with their long-ago ancestors in Britain she thinks hazily. It's a boring ride with many stops even as it passes too quickly, waving goodbye to her new best friends Dustin and Lucas when their stops are announced in the Midwest. Mike and Will got off a little earlier but Max is on the train nearly to the end. What would be a full two days by mundane means still takes hours.

The door slides open and her step-brother stands there, blue eyes looking over Max and all of her belongings spread across the compartment.

"Hope you can pack all that up real quick," Billy says even as he takes a step forward to help her with a yawn. "Our stop is next."

Max shakes her head and crams the tabletop game back in the bag Dustin has loaned her. By the end of the summer, she will get the hang of character sheets and storytelling when the characters are the size of her thumb and act out everything.

Billy walks in front of her to the parking lot once they disembark. Neil's truck is the only vehicle, probably because it's three-thirty in the morning. He doesn't look happy to see them but Max isn't sure he's ever happy. She hasn't missed him during the school year and only missed her mom a little but they exchanged letters.

Max starts to climb in the truck as Billy throws their trunks in the

back but Neil's voice stops her.

"You know my rule, son." Max watches as Billy hands over his wand and can't stop her mouth falling open in shock. She knows a wand isn't the source of a person's magic or the seat of their power, that's always the place somewhere inside them, but it is the most important tool.

"None of that wand waving foolishness under my roof." Neil mutters and grasps the oak wand at either end. Max gasps as he raises his knee and snaps it in two.

"What did you do?" Max's voice is a strangled whisper. "Why?"

"Because there's no magic allowed outside of school," Neil says kindly, patronizing. "I'm preventing my son from the temptation." He beckons at her and Max stares in confusion.

"Your wand, Maxine. Hand it over." The words in a harsher tone are ice in Max's veins.

"No!" Max takes a step back but Billy is already there, preventing her from running away. His hand is heavy on her shoulder and he plucks Max's cherry wand with a unicorn hair from her back pocket. She hasn't even had it a full year. "You can't!"

"He can't do this!" Max twists to look up at her step-brother, who's become an immovable force as her wand slips from his hand into Neil's waiting grasp.

"I'm only helping you," Neil says, right before he snaps Max's wand. He has no magic himself, Max knows, and there's no sparkle of light or rush of wind at the horrific act. Max flinches despite herself, Billy's hands holding her tight. They're still in the parking lot.

"You'll see," Neil tells them both, exhaustion showing like he's done a momentous act. He has, but not in the same way that it cuts at Max. "I do this for your own good. Now get in the truck and let's go home."

Max thought she was done crying alone in her bedroom after getting punished in mundane school, or when she thought her dad had left because of the things she couldn't control that was just the magic he

gifted her. It turns out she was wrong.

She wipes her face and goes to Billy's room once the house is quiet and dark, Neil's snores rumbling through the cheap wood of the master bedroom door.

"He can't do this," Max whispers fiercely. Her magic is thrumming in time with her heartbeat, a trapped hummingbird at the unfairness and sheer wrong of what happened. She's defenseless, even though she's only had a wand since fall last year.

Max feels naked without it under her pillow.

"He did," Billy says and rolls over in his bed to look at her. He sits up and props his arm on bended knee. "You'll get used to it, and be stronger for it. I promise."

There's something unsettling the gleam of his white teeth, a Cheshire grin Max hasn't seen before from him. She sits down next to him anyhow, wary but interested.

"Look," Billy huffs a breath and reaches for the pack of herbals on his nightstand. "Our life at school is a fairytale."

"And your dad is like, Captain Hook and determined to ruin any fun." She shuts her mouth on any other unfavorable comparisons as Billy lights his cigarette with a tiny flame dancing on the end of his index finger.

Billy doesn't cover his mouth as he coughs at her words, blue eyes watering. "Could you have timed that any worse?" He coughs again and smoke curls from his finger as Max stares.

"How did you do that?"

"Sold my soul," Billy answers her in an offhand, matter of fact tone.

Max recoils and he chuckles.

"I'm joking, don't get your panties in a knot. It's what I was talking about before, being stronger for it even though it sucks hardcore. Do you think those kids you pal around with at school could do this?"

He makes the flame appear again and rolls it around his fingers like a coin trick. "Not even all those who are my age can do this."

"But your wand," Max says, confused.

"It's just a focus." Billy says, so gently like the words will hurt Max worse than anything else that's already happened in the last hour. "So I get a new one before the start of the school year, and I'll take you with me. Costs a pretty penny but my dad will pay for it, he knows he has to. Can't show up without a wand, after all. It would raise too many questions."

"I thought the wand chose me?" Max mutters, ignoring the bitter tone on those last words. She had been thrilled the day she got her wand. The fourth wand she had picked up had sent warmth up her arm and gold sparks into the air. "How can another choose me?"

"Because you're not the same person as you were then." Billy exhales and Max leans against his headboard as he wraps an arm around her shoulders. "I'm sorry too, for what it's worth. Trust me, running away just makes him worse." His arm tightens and Max burrows into his side, the memory of something raw and painful in his voice.

"So you'll be better for it, Max. I promise. The next wand that chooses you at the end of the summer, it'll be even better suited to you. Growing as you grow, I guess." He stubs out the herbal on the ashtray Max hadn't even noticed was floating by his knee and waves it back to the nightstand with a careless flick of his hand. "It's not all bad."

Max bites at her lip. "Are you gonna go to a friend's house?"

"And leave you alone with him, you mean?" Max shakes her head a little, denying the truth behind her question.

"No," Billy sighs. "If I go anywhere, I'll take you with me. If you promise to keep your mouth shut."

Max swears and Billy smiles, something softer in his face before he shoos her back to her own bed before she actually falls asleep in his. She stares at the ceiling with the water stain in the corner over the

desk she might actually use this summer. For her magic theory homework since practicals weren't allowed.

Max is magic and nothing Neil or her mom do to her can stop that. Her step-brother is a little scary but he also knows a lot, a little bit about everything it seems.

Max is magic and she's just getting started.